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22 October 1980

Near East/North Africa Report

(FOUO 38/80)



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NEAR EAST/NORTH AFRICA REPORT

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ALGERIA

BEN BELLA'S HOUSE ARREST EASED

Paris JEUNE AFRIQUE in French 27 Aug 80 p 45

[Signed by Jean-Louis Buchet]

[Text] Although Ben Bella still cannot take his BMW and travel without armed escort beyond the 20,000 sq km of the Governorate where he is under house arrest, he will soon be able to go anywhere inside a territory 100 times large--all of Algeria.

Now 64 years old, Ben Bella will finally be released after 14 years a prisoner in his own country and house arrest in Msila (250 km southeast of Algiers) since 5 July 1979. The first thing he must do is go back to Maghnia, in Oran, in fulfillment of one of his keenest desires, to pray at the tomb of his mother. He will probably have to wait awhile before permission is given for him to leave the country. This will enable him, as he has requested, to go to Mecca. Freedom in baby steps...

Sailing with the Wind

For more than a year Ben Bella has no longer been the oldest political prisoner in the world, officially at least. Since then, he has had many visitors in the large villa where he lives with his wife Zohra and two daughters. Between ten in the morning and six in the afternoon, friends and followers, veterans of the liberation struggle, or just ordinary citizens coming to exchange a few words with the first president of independent Algeria, crowd in to see him. This "pilgrimage" often seemed to annoy the authorities and make them uneasy. Police took the names of visitors and frequently asked the reason for their visit. There was no harassment, but a nervous sort of intimidation reflecting the discomfort of those in power over the Ben Bella "case."

In rare writings coming out of Algeria--an interview with the Iranian newspaper ETTELA'AT and a long letter published by J. A.--Ben Bella, who is slender, astonishingly young-looking despite greying temples, and affable and loquacious, gave the appearance of a man who has read a great deal, following world affairs closely, and who does not expect to play a new role in his country.

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He is at times troubled, with many ideas brewing, critical of the single party and the absence of democracy in the Arab Moslem countries. He professes great admiration for the Iranian revolution and regards the reawakening of Islam as a lever in the struggle against imperialism. Passionately sincere but sailing with the wind...

Why did the Algerian government finally decide to lift the house arrest of the "illustrious guest" in Msila? It might well be asked why the government failed to do so sooner and why on July 5, 1979, it went only half-way. No clear answer exists other than that it first had to contend with the opposition of a part of the governing team which is hostile to any change in the prisoner's status. Ever since Ben Bella went to Msila, they realized there would be no backtracking and that eventually he would recover his full freedom.

The example of the neighboring countries, Tunisia and Morocco, also seemed to benefit Ben Bella. A single trend towards liberalization affected the North African capitals. In Rabat, with the major exception of Abraham Serfaty and a few of his friends, political prisoners were released in July. In Tunisia, particularly, only prisoners being held for their religious beliefs remained as of 3 August. In Algeria, which released prisoners in 1979, just the restrictions against Ben Bella remain.

Only one other political figure besides the Msila "ayatollah" is living under house arrest in North Africa. That is Habib Achour, the former head of the Tunisian trade unions, who is restricted to his villa.

North Africa 1980

Tunisia, which has been the dynamic force behind the movement this year ever since the appointment of Mohammed Mzali as its prime minister, would be the only country with a problem of this sort left should Ben Bella be released soon. Even so, the fate of Habib Achour will have to be decided in the coming months as trade union life returns to normal.

With only a little time left and if the trend takes hold everywhere, the end of 1980 may find North Africa, if not Africa as a whole, with no political prisoners remaining in custody.

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IRAN

IRANIAN DIPLOMAT: IRAN RECEIVING SPARE PARTS

JN301210 London REUTER in English 1203 GMT 30 Sep 80

[Text] Brussels, Sep 30 (REUTER)--A senior Iranian diplomat said here today that Iran was still receiving spare parts for much of its Western-built military equipment.

Mohammad Hassan Mohazed, Iran's charge d'affaires in Belgium, told a press conference that Tehran was buying spares "on the free market" but refused to elaborate.

Mr Mohazed, giving his government's view of the week-old war with Iraq, said: There is no spare parts problem for the [words indistinct] because of U.S. and Western European trade embargoes imposed over the detention of U.S. hostages in Iran.

Since the Gulf war started on September 22, there has been speculation that the Iranian forces would find it difficult to hold out because of a lack of spare parts for its armoury, purchased by the former shah.

Mr Mohazed said Iraq was fulfilling a U.S. plan to take over from the late shah as "gendarme of the Gulf." By attacking Iran, it was "playing an American card," he said.

Tehran could not envisage peace negotiations until Iraq had withdrawn to recognised frontiers, declared a total ceasefire and given guarantees of non-interference in Iran's internal affairs, he said.

On the interruption of oil supplies, Mr Mohazed said Iran could resume exports of crude oil as soon as fighting ceased.

But the refinery at Abadan, one of the first Iraqi targets, would take at least two months to be operational again, he said.

Iraqi bombardments had destroyed two storage tanks and a control tower at the refinery, Mr Mohazed said. Technicians [words indistinct].

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LEBANON

FORMER PREMIER KARAMI OUTLINES VIEWS ON LEBANESE SITUATION

Paris AL-WATAN AL-'ARABI in Arabic 8-14 Aug 80 pp 27-29

[Interview with Former Premier Rashid Karami by Kazim 'Uwayd and al-Quds Baras; date and place not given]

[Text] Compared to other "immortal" traditional politicians in Lebanon, Rashid Karami is considered young in years. He is not more than 55 years old, but his political age spans 30 full years during which he has always been at the forefront of politics and events.

He is of noble descent, coming from an old, Moslem family that is well-known for its position among the people and for its wealth in the area of its influence: the coastal city of Tripoli in North Lebanon.

He is also seasoned in his political sophistication. He is a Moslem politician with traditional local Lebanese standards. He plays the political game well according to its routine principles of maneuver which have been customary for scores or perhaps hundreds of years in his country, Lebanon.

He is seasoned in his ability to graft on to his traditional leadership numerous and various Arab relations that give his political image a nature that is quite acceptable to leftist forces.

He is seasoned in his constant ability to say everything without saying anything; to accuse someone without hurting him; and to argue with someone without making him his enemy.

He is seasoned in his professional devotion to politics, even though he still practices it as though he were an amateur. He immerses himself in it, but is not burned by its fires; he floats on the surface of politics without being soiled by its mire; and he comes to politics wearing the garb of a self-denying ascetic.

He is a seasoned bachelor. His view of marriage may be similar to his view of politics: an inescapable evil. So far he has been spared the evil of both despite his preoccupation with political activity, and even though he

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was nominated more than once early in his youth to marry the most beautiful and the most respected women in his Lebanese and Arab society.

His title in Tripoli is al-Afandi [the gentleman]. Contrary to his custom, he was harsh in this interview on the administration and on his friend and colleague during the Shihab presidency, President Elias Sarkis.

Karami's harshness towards the man in the administration may stem from the fact that he knows that Sarkis is his equal in forbearance and wisdom and his superior in patience, endurance, courage and calm acceptance of political campaigns and criticisms.

[Question] How do you explain the fact that the resignation of the government of Dr Salim al-Huss has been accepted and that Mr Taqiy al-Din al-Sulh has been charged with forming the new government?

[Answer] It is my opinion that the resignation was basically an error because what the prime minister represents on the government scene requires that he remain on the scene since the reason behind the resignation was a difference of opinion and policy between him and the president.

A position such as this does require steadfastness and perseverance rather than leaving the scene and giving the president the opportunity to act as he wishes. The fact that the resignation was accepted is natural since the prime minister submitted it and left it up to the president to accept it. But it is the timing here that raises questions.

Among the events that took place, especially in the eastern areas, were incidents between the Phalangists and the liberals. These incidents were accompanied by hardships and tragedies: murder, destruction and sabotage were committed to impose the authority of the single party; to control the course of events in a part of Lebanon's territory; and to let the Phalangists proclaim themselves their sole spokesman. Accordingly, they would work to serve the objectives they were seeking. All this left considerable rancor in public opinion. At any rate, all these abnormal actions and practices lead us to interpret the fact that the prime minister's resignation was accepted under these circumstances in particular to be an act designed to cover up what has happened and to shift the public's attention from focusing on these events and those that accompanied them as well as the complications and implications that may develop from them to the formation of the government and to those who will be in it.

This distraction may be one of the objectives of accepting the resignation. In my opinion the attempt to confuse the issue, to deal a blow to the national rank and to break it up may be another objective since the eastern areas are now under the control of the Phalangists who dispense with matters as they please. Therefore, this confusion of the issue is designed for our areas.

But to say that forming the government is a prelude to national accord [is not accurate]. This would have required the government to make

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preparations and to take steps that should have been taken when the president began his term of office. But for the president to pretend suddenly that he is doing this for the national accord [is less than honest]. We believe that the opposite is the truth. That is, we believe that this is an attempt to separate the ranks on the principle of "separate the ranks and obstruct the solution." Today especially it seems difficult if not impossible to form the effective government which has been promoted, praised and celebrated. The people in the cabinet are known, and what they represent is also known.

Therefore, after matters became clear, it became evident to many that what was happening had been planned and that it was accordingly serving that movement whose positions seemed to champion the partition. That movement was dealing with the enemy and, consequently, was trying to force its ideas and its policies on all of Lebanon by means of controlling specific areas by force and entering into government. It would thus be feasible for it to play the role that would coincide and agree with its aspirations and its goals.

Accordingly, we rejected what was happening, and we imagined that this plan could never pass.

The Administration Favors the Phalangists

[Question] Do you believe that the government does in fact intend to bestow a measure of legitimacy upon the Phalangists, or at least to stay quiet about the fact that they have control over the eastern areas, by making them partners in the new government?

[Answer] I do not want to judge intentions; [I prefer to judge] actions. The government's behavior clearly indicates that President Sarkis has been siding with the Phalangists during the years that he has been in power. He has always avoided taking positions that the Phalangists reject or those that he senses may displease them.

When the painful events took place in al-Safra and the National Liberal Party was liquidated in this dreadful manner, everyone was calling for the army to enter into those areas, to put an end to the massacres that were taking place and to protect the innocent and the peaceful. Unfortunately, however, the army did not do this.

What became evident later is that an opportunity was created for the Phalangists to come to power. This involved a cover up of the massacres and of those who carried them out and, unfortunately, it involved rewarding the perpetrators for those practices. This was an attempt to bring together the victim and the executioner, the criminal and his victim. This conduct was a clear indication of the administration's policy and practices.

[Question] You are advocating the establishment of a broad national front. Is it possible for this front to include, for example, Sham'un the father or Sham'un the son and Raymond Iddih?

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[Answer] The fact is that developments bring us closer every day to the broad front which we have called for because the events and the fast pace at which those events are taking place make some people come to terms with others whether they want to or not. Everyone who is affected by the pressures and the burdens of the events is forced to move towards the position in which he would find his objective, whether it be cooperating with colleagues who are working to save Lebanon from what it is being subject to or avoiding injustice and aggression. We believe that an agreement that is made on the basis of uniform principles and objectives is an agreement that is more stable, more powerful and more [likely] to survive.

Therefore we think that as the procession proceeds on its course, it picks up the forces, one group after another. This is because the stations through which the procession travels are all located on the road that leads to the unity of Lebanon and to the establishment of its Arab character and its democracy. Therefore, we are not placing obstacles in front of anyone who wants to cooperate on the basis of correct principles.

[Question] But President Sham'un is among those who are being accused of dealing with Israel!

[Answer] I do not distinguish between the Phalangists and the liberals in their positions and their objectives, and I consider President Sham'un to be more responsible than others in this area. According to what I believe, he was the one to open the door to dealing with Israel. It is for this reason that I said that an agreement over principles and objectives is the basic condition for those who want to deal with the broad front.

[Question] Do you believe that if the Phalangists actually wanted to establish their own state, they would be capable of imposing it by force?

[Answer] No foundation can be firmly established of anything that is imposed by force and is alien to public interest and conviction. It is true that the Phalangists are seeking a state that they can govern. It is our opinion that the partition has in fact taken place and that it only lacks a proclamation. But this state has become very small and very weak.

And here we must focus on the position of President Franjiyah and on the national accord in the north which cut down the size of this state as it was planning to do. Also the developments that recently took place in Wadi Shahrur and in the region of B'abda resulted in the further shrinkage of this state.

On this basis it is our opinion that the Phalangists had sought this situation and these developments. Therefore, they have been sounding the alarm about what is happening and about the partition so as to proclaim the new slogan of "Liberating all Lebanon." This means that today the Phalangists are trying to impose their control on liberated Lebanon.

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Since we have known from the beginning that there were two movements vying with each other in Lebanon--a libertarian movement which seeks the unity and the Arab character of Lebanon, and another movement which is working for partition and for the establishment of small sectarian states--we are confident that this conspiracy will not be successful. The movement which is working to restore Lebanon to a situation that is better than its former situation is the one that will ultimately be victorious despite all attempts [to the contrary]. Among these attempts is the recent one which developed because of the fact that the resignation was accepted and the effort was being made to form a new government to gain time and to break up the national rank or the movement that I am talking about.

The Government Erred

[Question] Has the government had a full opportunity to impose its legitimacy?

[Answer] There is no doubt that we, as representatives who are responsible for the cause of a sovereign, Arab, undivided Lebanon, must strive by all means to ward off all the dangers that surround us, either in the south from the Zionist enemy and his agent, Sa'd Hadda, or from the inside with regard to the rightist parties and what they are aiming at.

Your question to me concerns the government which we had expected would side with the movement that wants Lebanon to survive and to continue as a united country capable of performing its role and its mission in the context of the undisputed principles that have been announced by that state.

But in practice we sensed that the administration sided with the other party. I find the government's justification that this bias was an attempt to prevent or to dissuade those people from their way of thinking or their course and then to restore them to legitimacy and to the correct course to be unreasonable. The evidence for this lies in the fact that the position the government has had for 4 years has increased their tenacity, their viciousness and their determination [to pursue] their policy.

Thus, the opportunities which the government should have taken advantage of to rid itself of these dangers have all been lost. The government is now in a state of atrophy, weakness and non-presence so that the atmosphere in the opinion of the deviants and the clients is now prepared for further tenacity, aggression and exclusive control.

It is on this premise that we consider the government to have erred considerably; it is responsible for the fact that the country is floundering at the present time. Therefore, it is necessary that we do arrive at a balanced national government that is capable of saving the country from this conspiracy by means of forming a government today. If the president does not comply in this regard, it would be my opinion that the road may be blocked for him and that he, not we, would have to take another position.

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[Question] Is this accusation that you are making against the government based on the request that the chief figure in the administration step aside?

[Answer] This is not improbable; nor would it be difficult for us. Under previous conditions we did call upon him to step aside and to resign if he did not straighten out and do what was in the interests of the country.

When he fails to form a government that pleases national public opinion, the country would have a vacuum in the government, and he would then find himself at a dead end.

[Question] Is the political confusion, the fighting, the fragmentation and the assassinations that are happening in Lebanon the result of the position taken by Lebanon's national forces in their confrontation attempts to get Lebanon outside the national rank?

[Answer] It is not possible for us to neglect our pan-Arab and our national duty in confronting all these attempts from all these agencies. I am referring to the knights of Camp David.

Lebanon has stood alone on the scene since its ongoing crisis began in 1975. It has defended Arab principles and Arab rights in the face of the most vicious attack to befall an Arab country.

We believe that had there been Arab solidarity; had there been Arab preparedness; and had there been a steadfast position, Lebanon would not have been subjected to what it has been subjected to because our causes, our destiny and our rights are matters whose service and whose championship are tied to the Arab position as a whole.

This partisanship and this disunity are the most horrible things we are facing and the most difficult things we can experience. Thus the Camp David Accord and al-Sadat's treacherous visit were the direct cause for this mangled Arab situation.

Hence, we have always been calling upon our Arab brothers, and especially the kings and presidents, to take action and to take the initiative in gathering the rank and setting up the joint plan for taking action to save Arab destiny and not only Lebanon.

Between the Hard Stone and the Rock

[Question] What is your view of the role which the Broad National Front can play--the front which you are advocating for opposing the plans that you have already mentioned?

[Answer] The point I want to make is to call everyone's attention, on the local and on the Arab scene, to the danger of what the Phalangists

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have done in the eastern regions. The statements that were made by Bashir al-Jumayyil openly indicate the objectives of what has happened. Had there not been a major objective [the Phalangists] would not have allowed themselves to liquidate a major ally like Camille Sham'un. They are making plans to deal a blow to the Palestinian resistance and to the national forces as well which are now between the hard stone and the rock: that is, they are between the united rightist forces which are supported by the Zionist enemy and proceeding from the areas which they control and, on the other side, Sa'd Haddad and the enemy directly.

This threat is not confined to Lebanon and to the Palestinians only. It will rather be the result of future action taken to achieve this objective of exploding the entire area. Afterwards, no one can remain aloof watching what is happening because he too would be targeted. What [the enemies] are striving for and working towards is to force capitulation on the Arabs.

Don't Use the Militias To Deal Blow to the Resistance

[Question] Your Excellency, you have spoken to us in general terms, but you have not told us what is being proposed as a course of action for the resistance movement in the current stage of the Lebanese crisis. It is known that the resistance has proclaimed general conscription after the Phalangists took the step they did take and that the resistance was notified by Soviet sources that the enemy may undertake an all-out war. The general climate portends explosions or developments of an exceptional nature from now until the U.S. elections are over.

[Answer] There is no doubt that the Palestinian question is the basis for the solution in the area. Accordingly, the focus must be on the Palestinian people, or rather on the Palestinian Revolution since there can be no cause without a people. This conspiracy wants to erode the Palestinian Revolution so as to force it to accept the solutions that were formulated at Camp David. This resistance, therefore, must always be ready to defend its rights. To do this it must keep away from its course all errors and all practices that may lead to an estrangement between it and public opinion. This is because the strongest weapon the Palestinian people have lies in the fact that all their energies would stand by their side in their just struggle.

We cannot hold the Palestinian Resistance responsible for everything that happened. In fact, all the parties are responsible because they did not deal with this question and with the difficult circumstances and conspiracies it is undergoing with a logic of support and backing. They did not even try to correct errors and practices. I have said this [before], and I will always say it: the attempt to deal a blow to the Palestinian Resistance through the militias is a mortal sin because the thought of imposing what they are asking of the resistance by using the militias and force resulted in the threat of colonization or rather making colonization one of the objectives of Camp David.

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Also one of the results [of this action] was the weakness of the government and of the state which is now incapable of playing its role and carrying out its responsibilities. In fact, I rather think that colonization cannot be resisted by means of eroding the Palestinian Resistance, weakening it and distracting it away from its real struggle. Colonization, can rather be resisted by standing beside the Palestinian Resistance, strengthening its course and championing its legitimate rights, chief among which is its right to establish its own state on the territory of Palestine and the Palestinians' right to return to their homeland. This is how colonization can be fought; it cannot be fought by fighting against the Palestinians.

[Question] Does this mean that you are relieved about the announcement made by the resistance that it would close down its offices and bring an end to military manifestations?

[Answer] There is no doubt that these steps are positive, patriotic and sincere steps. We hope they will be carried out with the true intentions that were behind taking them.

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SYRIA

REASONS FOR AL-BITAR'S ASSASSINATION PROBED

Paris AL-WATAN AL-'ARABI in Arabic 25-31 Jul 80 pp 27-29

[Article by the Political Editor: "What Did Salah al-Bitar Say to Hafiz al-Asad?"]

[Excerpts] The 70 years of Salah al-Bitar's life epitomize Syria's life and tragedy during its modern history. It is a tragedy which once caused Winston Churchill to say, out of his gloating scorn for the Arabs, "the Syrians don't know how to govern themselves, and they don't want anyone else to govern them."

Al-Bitar was a man most averse to violence, but he lived in the depths of violence and also died by violence.

Salah al-Din al-Bitar did not manufacture revolutions, but preached them, and his ideas paved the way for them.

A Meeting With Hafiz al-Asad

His return to his small homeland in 1977 renewed desires and beliefs in the great man's soul that Syria would someday find greater stability, safety and security. He had a meeting with President al-Asad, in which he expounded his aspirations and desires.

Salah al-Bitar said of that meeting that he talked with the Syrian president about his hope and desire to see his country taking deliberate, firm steps towards democracy. He added that the president replied to the effect that democracy had been granted by the Progressive National Front.

Al-Bitar remained silent. He scratched his chin with his finger and twisted his lips. He was indicating that he was not convinced of what he had heard.

As he approached his seventieth birthday, Salah al-Bitar took off again, and this time settled in Paris. He had come to know it as a student and a young man, and had later fled to it as a leader and militant. This

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time, he was returning to it as an old man whose wishes had been frustrated by the passage of time. The frustration had left its traces plain on his calm face.

In Paris, he enjoyed sitting down at a secluded table in a coffeeshop near the Lido coffeehouse on the Champs de Elysee to eat a toasted cheese sandwich brought to him by the waiter. After his simple meal he would sedately cross the street to sit with some companions or visitors at the Fouquet or the Cafe de Paris coffeeshops. Then he would buy a lemonade and descend to the Metro to ride home.

This was his day. He would get ready in the morning to publish his semi-monthly paper AL-AHYA' AL-'ARABI. The name is not very journalistic, but he chose it because it reminded him of the first nationalist Arab society he and some comrades from the intellectual elite had belonged to in the 1930's in Damascus, after his return from France. Some of them have become silent, others have emigrated, and still others have gone to their graves.

AL-AHYA' AL-'ARABI was published in a modest format and with an ascetic appearance. He would say that he published it that way intentionally, not wanting to compete with the elegant magazines being published in Europe. He wanted it to convey his ideas and nothing more.

AL-AHYA' AL-'ARABI was a magazine for political thought, housed on the eighth floor of a skyscraper which he had chosen, a huge building on Foch Street near L'Etoile, in the heart of Paris.

The rush of events and serious circumstances forced Professor Salah to survey, from time to time, his own small country of Syria, through the medium of his magazine.

He was against violence, whatever its coloration or justification, but he was also against whatever caused it. His harsh attacks on the regime may have hastened his sudden end by a professional killer's single bullet fired from the revolver of a regime at the height of its anger at its enemies and opponents.

Did al-Bitar Conduct Any Secret Activity?

Did Salah al-Bitar give his life to pay for recent secret political activity against the regime of Hafiz al-Asad?

It may be up to Damascus to answer this question. Its agencies may have some adherents who placed the great man on the wanted list.

Whether or not Salah al-Bitar's opposition was limited to his open opinions expressed in his magazine--an opposition which would not have gone beyond the bounds of his general opinions about other Arab regimes--the man had already paid an exorbitant price for it through his banishment, exile and expulsion. The bullet should have respected his advanced age.

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Some people say that Salah al-Bitar was an opposition figure, but he had no organized base in Syria which would have made him such a substantial danger to the regime as to necessitate his physical liquidation.

But the liquidation may arouse bitterness among a broad segment of Syrians who until recently went along with the regime or sat on the fence with regard to the battle between it and the religious violence gangs that were its adversaries. This segment includes the bourgeoisie, which flourished and became active in the 1970's, along with segments of the intelligentsia and technocratic groups which dream of democracy, and whose aspirations and tendencies al-Bitar had tried to express, not to mention expound, during the last 15 years of his life.

The abortive attempt to assassinate President al-Asad on 26 June may have been the main reason for the regime's radical outburst to stifle the voice of all of its overseas opponents and enemies by any means.

But the climax of the tragedy lies in the fact that the regime, at the peak of its agitation and anger, was unable to differentiate between those who opposed it with violence and those who opposed it with words.

The bullets brought down a man who had said that he chose verbal opposition to express the opinion of his country's "silent majority" as he saw it. This killing will no doubt increase this majority's alienation and feelings of bitterness and frustration, as well as their negative feelings towards the regime, at a time when the regime urgently needs domestic allies in the battle it is waging against religious violence.

In another sense, religious violence ultimately aimed at pushing the regime to the peak of anger, so that it cannot distinguish between its opposition and its enemies, between those who oppose it with words and those who oppose it with bombs and bullets.

A few days before his death, the great man was asked, "Do you believe that the solution might come through a military coup?" Salah al-Bitar scratched his chin as usual, twisted his lips, and said in his sharp, impetuous dialect which was moderated by his calm voice and his Damascene drawl, "I have said many times that military coups will not solve the problem."

The single professional bullet did not give Salah al-Bitar the chance to talk about the solution.

The bullet cut short his life. Its 70 years can be summed up as a reflection of the life, tragedy and tribulation of a country about whose people Winston Churchill said one day, with his malicious scorn and abominable hatred for the Arabs, "The Syrians don't know how to govern themselves, and they don't want anyone else to govern them."

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SYRIA

FORMER POLITICAL LEADER CALLS FOR DEMOCRATIC REGIME IN SYRIA

Paris AL-WATAN AL-'ARABI in Arabic 1-7 Aug 80 pp 27-30

[Interview with Former Syrian Political Leader Akram al-Hawrani, by Zakim al-Miqdadi; date and place not given]

[Excerpt] [Question] How do you view the present situation in Syria? What are the reasons for the disturbance there?

[Answer] One must go back to the roots of the Syrian problem to understand the situation in Syria and its serious repercussions on the Arab cause and the Arab world, since we Arabs are aware that Syria is the key to the Arab world, a fact well known by colonialism and Zionism. In other words, any change in Syria means a change in the equilibrium of the Arab world.

This was known to the West, even before Syria was occupied and divided during the French mandate. Therefore, we must rapidly review the development of the situation in Syria in the light of developments affecting international forces which have interests in the Arab world.

During the French mandate, Syria was occupied and partitioned into Alawite and Druze sectarian ministates. The Syrian people's struggle, under the leadership of national vanguards which escaped the Ottoman guillotine, was a struggle for independence and for the establishment of a republican democratic government based on everything the Syrian people had inherited and on all the democratic revolutionary values since the European Renaissance.

The Syrian struggle was not limited to fighting the mandate, but extended to participating in the struggles of the Arab peoples of Palestine, Iraq, North Africa, and the Arabian Peninsula. Unfortunately, many of these contributions made by partitioned Syria are not known until this day.

After successive revolts against the mandate for the sake of independence, democracy and Syrian unity, the Syrian people managed to become independent and to finally unite Syria. The French and British armies were forced to evacuate Syria after the Second World War and the 1945 revolution. The last French and British soldiers left the country in 1946.

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Syria, through the struggle of its unarmed people, was the first country in the Third World to actually become independent. Syria burst forth onto the scene in a manner which aroused amazement and astonishment at the constructive activity carried out on all social, political, economic and military levels.

Its national income began to rise in a manner unattained by any other country. Syria, in spite of some of the coups concocted by the Baghdad Alliance, Britain, America and some reactionary forces, was able to exploit colonialist contradictions. It quickly eliminated the military dictatorships some of which lasted only months, with the exception of the Adib al-Shishakli coup which lasted 3 years.

This Is What We Achieved In the Era of Democracy

[Question] Yes, the dictatorships collapsed sooner or later. But what did democracy achieve for Syria?

[Answer] Syria was the first Third World country to totally nationalize all utilities and foreign companies (the water, electricity and railroad companies, the tobacco monopoly, and so forth). It made its currency independent and nationalized the export bank. It eliminated feudalism and tribalism through the efforts of its popular masses, and attained its popular unity on the basis of a comprehensive mass socio-political struggle.

For example, Syria was the first country in Asia and Africa to pass a progressive labor law in 1949. Suffice it to say that Syria was the first country, even before the European countries, to give women their political rights (the right to vote) in 1949.

Syria was the first country to adopt planning as a means of achieving development projects, which were carried out by the national democratic regime: the al-Ghab, Homs and Hamah irrigation projects; the Rawj, Baniyas and al-Khabur projects; the Euphrates Dam project; the ports of Larakiya and Tartus; the Homs refinery; the amendment of petroleum transit agreements with the Iraqi Oil Company and TAPLINE; and so forth.

On the educational level, education was nationalized and schools were built, all without obtaining foreign grants, aid or loans like those which are pouring into Syria today from all over the world, because Syria actually followed a policy of positive neutrality and refused all conditional aid and loans.

All of this was accomplished under the auspices of parliamentary democracy, even though Syria was constantly surrounded by the plotting of neighboring Arab and foreign countries, old and new colonialism, Zionism and Israel.

Syria was able to make progress in previous times, even though it was an arena for international rivalry over the Arab world.

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In spite of its weak material resources and small population (3 million at the time) Syria carried the burden of defending the Palestinian cause. Ever since independence and up to this very moment, it has allocated more than 60 percent of its budget to the Palestinian cause.

Syria played a basic role in terminating the Baghdad Alliance and all colonialist plots, the most recent being the Eisenhower plan. Consequently, its heroic militant progress was crowned with the establishment of an all-inclusive Arab federation. The union failed for reasons which we have no room to go into here.

This is a summary of Syria's past accomplishments. Here we must pause a bit to observe that after European colonialist presence and occupation was eliminated, the two superpowers' struggle for spheres of influence in the world began.

The fact is that America and Zionism are both aiming at achieving their colonialist aspirations in the Arab world. The hostile Zionist plot to expand at the expense of the Arabs could only be achieved by dividing the region into sectarian, racist, and doctrinal ministates. Therefore, Zionist plotting since the First World War joined colonialist plotting against the Arab world. After the Second World War, there was close harmony between American and Zionist plotting in the region.

On the other hand, the Soviets began trying to get themselves a share of influence and presence in the most significant and important region of the world--the Middle East, on which the machinery of Western life depends, not to mention its strategic location which would determine the outcome of a Third World War.

The Soviets and the socialist camp began selling arms to the Arabs and offering economic aid. Syria was the first Arab country to eliminate the Western arms monopoly.

Sectarianism Began in 1966

[Question] But why has the sectarian problem emerged in Syria now? I mean to say, is there really a sectarian problem, or are the regime's enemies trying to create one?

[Answer] The sectarian situation in Syria began with the 23 February 1966 coup. It developed into an opportunistic sectarian military government which began by shattering the national unity built by the people during its long struggle before and after the evacuation of colonial forces.

Sectarian rule, which by its very nature loses support of the masses, is always looking for foreign backers. It is no secret that the existing government is trying to get such support from the Soviet Union, just as it had always tried to get it from America and the West.

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It has been said by official sources, and it continues to be said until this day, that after the 5 June 1967 defeat, the Soviets asked to establish a military base on the Syrian coast, in return for liberating the Golan Heights but not Palestine from Israeli occupation.

[Question] Don't you believe that the June 1967 war contributed to the present situation in Syria?

[Answer] We must stop here a while to scrutinize the current regime's situation, its sectarian, military nature, and its responsibility for the 5 June defeat. Hafiz al-Asad was the commander of the army and the air force, defense minister, and member of the national and regional commands [of the Ba'th party]. His responsibility for the defeat can be summarized in the following points.

1. For the first time in the history of warfare an order for conditional withdrawal was issued before the army entered into combat with the enemy.
2. For the first time in the history of warfare, the fall of al-Qunaytrah was announced even before it fell and after orders for withdrawal and evacuation of the front was issued. It was tragicomic that in the debate between the Israeli and Syrian delegates [to the UN], the Israeli delegate branded as a lie the Syrian delegate's statement that al-Qunaytrah had fallen.
3. In addition to this, the commander of the army forbade the 70th brigade, which was the best Syrian brigade, from engaging in combat, on the pretext that it had to stay out of the battle in order to protect the regime in Damascus.
4. As recorded in the UN debates, Syria rejected a request for a cease-fire, giving the Israeli army the chance to occupy al-Qunaytrah and Golan. They ordered the retreat and rejected the cease-fire!

I am not claiming, and no one else is, that Syria had it in its power to defeat Israel singlehandedly. But surely, if the government in Syria had been national, democratic and popular, the military and political results of the June war, and subsequent developments, would have been different.

[Question] Do you mean to say that the slogan "the regime before the land" is an unacceptable excuse for what happened in the June War?

[Answer] The military sectarian regime in Syria raised these slogans under Soviet auspices, and claimed that Israel had failed in its war because it had been unable to topple the "progressive" regimes. There is no need to point out that the Syrian people were an example of self-control after the defeat, at a time when the sectarian military state hid its face.

It was easy to pounce on this regime then. The only thing preventing this was consternation over the disastrous Israeli occupation of Arab territory in Syria, Egypt, and all of Palestine.

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This was the first phase of Soviet patronage for this sectarian military regime.

[Question] Soviet patronage--but President al-Asad's regime says that even now it refuses to sign a friendship pact with the Soviets.

[Answer] Salah Jadid almost involved America and the Soviet Union in a confrontation when the Syrian army intervened in the 1970 Jordanian massacres.

Hafiz al-Asad launched his coup against his colleagues without accusing them of anything, except for the single charge that Salah Jadid was a man of intrigue. Today he is in prison with his colleagues. They practically faced death without trial.

Naturally, the nations in America's retinue and the domestic capitalist base in Syria applauded and supported the new regime. It is no secret that the Soviets commanded and instructed the Syrian Communist Party of Khalid Bakdash, to resist and oppose Hafiz's coup, considering it to be an "American coup."

Somehow, however, and in a matter of days, [Soviet] hostility changed into welcome for the new regime and cooperation with it until this day.

The regime began by cooperating with the big bourgeoisie, and corrupted the economy, the administration and morals. The independence of the courts and the integrity of the agencies of which Syria had been so proud before the whole world was wiped out, to the point where they became the worst-managed and most corrupt agencies in the entire Arab world.

Another tragicomedy is that the government and its Communist and other allies claimed to be a progressive leftist regime. In fact, it was a regime mired in its backwardness and its intellectual, social and political reaction.

[Question] In your opinion, the regime was backward and reactionary, but how do you explain the support it receives from conservative and leftist Arab authorities?

[Answer] This regime has cooperated with Bakdash's party, and with the so-called national front, which was a group of opportunists who betrayed their parties. Killings and executions are increasing day by day, as is the number of members of all Syrian nationalist and progressive factions who are being detained.

If the ill repute of the Soviet "crony" 'Abd-al-Karim al-Jundi is proverbial for sadism and criminality and for what Syria suffered at his hands, the current regime has surpassed him in sadism. Under this regime, overseas migration has increased, as has the number of detainees and executions. The various kinds of torture are proliferating, and the number of intelligence agents has reached astronomical figures.

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Nevertheless, we see the Arab states, be they conservative or progressive, opening all their financial faucets to support the regime, in addition to Western and American aid.

[Question] Permit me to interrupt you again, but don't you believe that the October 1973 war waged by President al-Asad's regime was in revenge for the June defeat?

[Answer] We must expose this claim. The October war, which is praised today by those who claim that they are opposed to the Camp David agreements, resulted in the occupation of more Syrian territory. The Israeli army would even have reached Damascus if it had not been for the rapid, heroic intervention of the Iraqi army.

Nevertheless, Hafiz al-Asad refused to continue fighting alongside the Iraqi army while Israel was reeling, preferring, he and al-Sadat, a cease-fire and participation in theatrics of "disengagement."

For the first time, Zionism and America penetrated the fortress of Arab Syria on a Trojan horse. Kissinger went to Damascus. Then there were the Geneva negotiations, Nixon's visit, the giving of new concessions to ARAMCO, and the implementation of the plot in Lebanon, which Kissinger has acknowledged.

At this point, one must remember al-Sadat's visit to Damascus on his way to Israel. At the time, after negotiations between the two of them, Hafiz al-Asad explained that he did not differ with al-Sadat on strategy, but that they disagreed on tactics.

Another tragicomedy is that the head of the regime, and the regimes allied with him, some of which call themselves progressive, have accused the Syrian people of being on the side of Camp David, because this people has opposed the criminal sectarian regime. This people has made sacrifices and is still making more sacrifices than other Arab people for the sake of Palestine.

[Question] And Lebanon? Don't you believe that Syrian intervention there stopped the civil war?

[Answer] Hafiz al-Asad's policy was in harmony with Kissinger's policy. The primary goal of Zionist policy is a sectarian and racist explosion in the Arab region. When the Lebanese war broke out, the chief of state in Damascus stood up and spoke at the Syrian university. He said that he would send the Syrian army to Lebanon to rescue the Lebanese front from the aggressors, that is, the leftist parties and the Palestinian Resistance.

In fact, the Tall al-Za'tar tragedy took place with the help of the Syrian army. What was even more serious, was that Israeli political and military presence in Lebanon became a fact, while Hafiz al-Asad claimed that he had sent the Syrian army to protect Lebanon.

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At this very moment, in full sight and hearing of this [Syrian] army, Israel is intervening, occupying land and committing aggression without this army firing a single shot. Matters have not stopped here, but have gone on to attempts to eliminate all true nationalist leaders in Lebanon. Kamal Junblatt was assassinated, and they tried to assassinate Raymond Iddih twice, because he refused to participate in the filthy civil war. Their last victim was martyr Riyadh Taha, the dean of Lebanese journalism.

Once again, it is tragicomic that the Syrian army should have intervened in Lebanon to butcher the Palestinian Resistance and the people, both Moslems and Christians, with ultimate bestiality and harshness, and that this massacre should have been covered up by a summit conference at which most of the Arab regimes committed themselves to financing Hafiz al-Asad's army in Lebanon. These regimes include those which claim to be nationalist, progressive, and fervent about the Palestinian cause.

Unprecedented Atrocities

[Question] Let us go back to the internal Syrian situation. Do you believe that the religious violence now being practiced against the regime is the best way to bring about change?

[Answer] The fact is that the current resentment in Syria existed before the Moslem Brotherhood detonated it.

The situation was like a time bomb. Nationalist and democratic forces other than the Brotherhood were incapacitated because of all the persecution, imprisonment and butchery they had suffered, while the Brotherhood was strong enough, organizationally and spiritually, to unleash and lead this tremendous, universal resentment.

Thus began the atrocities which the regime inflicted upon the Syrian people in a manner unprecedented in Syria or anywhere else.

Cities were fair game. Children, women and old men were murdered. Towns and rural areas were bombarded with artillery and airplanes. Houses were plundered and honor violated. Holy places were sacked, and so forth. The regime is still preoccupied with its outrages, examples of which are many.

It is enough to point out Hafiz al-Asad endorsed his brother's statement about physical liquidation of the opposition at home and abroad, the murder of millions, and the waging of hundreds of battles and so forth. It must be stressed that the head of state and his brother are fully responsible for the exploitation of sectarianism and the destruction of the national unity of the Syrian people in such a manner as to make sure that it cannot be mended. They depended on special units from al-Murshisiyah tribe, the most backward tribe in the Arab world, to pillage the towns. Therefore, a distinction must be made between exploitation of sectarianism and responsibility of a given sect.

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Syria, which achieved its independence and the evacuation of French and British armies from its territory through its successive rebellions, will always be able to extricate itself from the ordeal which Hafiz al-Asad is trying to bring upon Syria and the Arab world.

Syria is the key to the region, and al-Asad, in collusion with most of the Arab countries, is trying to make it the Achilles heel of the cause. But just as in the past, Syria will always be a torch for liberation and Arab progress. It will be fruitless for Arab and international information agencies to cloud the issue. The support which Hafiz al-Asad is getting from all Arab and international authorities will not do him or his brother any good.

The assassination of the freedom fighter Salah al-Din al-Bitar, who was one of the masters and militant leaders of his generation, at the age of 70, is but another indication of the depths to which the regime has sunk. It is even unashamed of this crime. The martyr's only offense was to call for a national democratic solution to the Syrian problem.

Salah al-Din al-Bitar was not the only member of the elite they have killed. Hundreds of intellectuals, doctors, lawyers and engineers have been killed. They committed no crime other than to demand the establishment of a national democratic regime in Syria.

[Question] How do you envisage democratic rule in Syria?

[Answer] Democracy must be parliamentary in the full sense of the word. In other words, there must be a guarantee of public and private freedoms; a separation of powers; an independent judicial system; the abolition of martial law, states of emergency and exceptional courts; and the freedom to form parties and societies and to publish newspapers. These are the very principles which have distinguished the world's democratic revolutions. They dictate the establishment of constitutional institutions based on free popular consultation.

[Question] But some people fear that in case of any change, sects and religious minorities would be exposed to counter-oppression.

[Answer] The departure of this regime would not mean the total disappearance of all the difficulties and troubles. But changing this regime would surely make room for building a democratic regime which would allow the restoration of national solidarity.

Syria will find itself with a heavy legacy. We believe that the Syrian people have the energy which will enable them to overcome all the legacies of the present bestial era.

[Question] Many people say that a military coup will not solve the problem. But given the fact that this might happen, are you prepared to support this kind of change?

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[Answer] I do not want to know who. I am a practical man, not a theoretician. The important thing is [sponsorship] of change, the people's attitude towards it, and who is for it and who is behind it. Past experience is sufficient to immunize our people against being duped by military coups again. The last deception was by the merchants of Damascus when they tried to propagandize the democratic promises of Hafiz al-Asad.

[Question] What do you expect will happen in Lebanon in case there is a change in Syria?

[Answer] Democratic change in Syria is the key to the solution of the Lebanese problem. Political leaders in Lebanon, be they Moslem or Christian, are more aware of this fact than the people are, but they don't dare espouse it in the shadow of the deterrent forces.

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SYRIA

FRIENDSHIP OR JOINT DEFENSE TREATY WITH USSR CONSIDERED

Paris AL-WATAN AL-'ARABI in Arabic 5-11 Sep 80 pp 22-23

[Article: "Soviet Relations With Syria: Friendship Treaty or Joint Defense Treaty?"]

[Text] Damascus is once again talking about the "special relationship" which it intends to establish with Moscow. Will this relationship take the form of a friendship treaty or a joint defense treaty? What are the reasons and motives behind this long look eastward?

In the wake of the confrontation with the Moslem Brotherhood which emerged in Damascus this May, there has been a call to strengthen relations with the Soviet Union, now that Syria, according to the "official propaganda," has become exposed to a huge American attack threatening its internal security.

These indications have appeared before, in President Hafiz al-Asad's speeches and in statements by ministers and officials, which have given the impression that under the pressure of events Syria will overstep the "red line" which it had previously drawn in its relations with Moscow.

Even though there were a great deal of news reports at the time dealing with the possibility that President Al-Asad might visit Moscow, talk about Syrian-Soviet relations date back to the beginning of the ruling party's national congress, and to the officials' preoccupation with making party changes and confronting the Moslem Brotherhood in various regions.

Today talk about Syrian-Soviet relations is reappearing. Hints of expected mutual visits between Moscow and Damascus are returning to the front pages of the news. Officials rarely confirm them in public statements, but they are never absent a moment from private discussion.

Has Syria made its decision to strengthen Syrian-Soviet relations? How far will these relations go, between a friendship treaty at the least and a joint defense treaty at the most?

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Justifications for Going to Moscow

Discussion about Syria's deepening inclination towards Moscow was preceded by indications that Syria might possibly turn towards the Soviet Union because of the combined developments in the region. These indications include the following:

1. Damascus' fear about the directions the winds are blowing in the Middle East issue, after discovering that it was unable, for Arab and internal reasons, to go along with Al-Sadat in his involvement with the United States and Israel. The most it could do was accept a disengagement agreement in Golan through Kissinger's mediation, and accept the United Nations Resolution 242 as a basis for solving the Middle East problem.
2. The fear that Israel might launch a widescale military operation in Lebanon, the results of which would be the occupation of the south or the establishment of a Maronite mini-state. Both cases would have repercussions on Syria's critical domestic situation, and would complicate Syria's position in the Arab world.
3. The feelings of isolation following the slackening of Syrian relations with a number of Arab capitals. Syrian-Iraqi relations took on new dimensions after the development which paralyzed diplomatic representation in both countries. Syrian-Jordanian relations have also taken on serious dimensions, after Syrian allegations that the brains behind the Moselem Brotherhood plots were in Amman, and after Syrian attacks on some Jordanian-Syrian border villages looking for collaborators with the brotherhood.

Syrian sources point out that Damascus' relations with the Gulf states are no better than those with Jordan, in view of Syrian-Iranian cooperation.

Syrian sources say that the feelings of isolation are pushing officials in Damascus towards Moscow, in an attempt to "intimidate" other capitals with Syrian might based on the Soviets. These sources feel that Syria's moving its battles against Arab regimes to other Arab and international capitals is part of Syria's shifting the confrontation overseas, now that the domestic confrontation has added extremely explosive factors to the isolation.

These sources say that the establishment of relations between Syria and Ethiopia was part of a Syrian-Soviet rapprochement, as well as being part of an operation to break the band of isolation surrounding Syria in the Middle East.

4. The Syrian desire to obtain more advanced arms for the Syrian army, including air defense network rockets which Moscow has not even given to

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its socialist camp allies, and advanced Mig 27 airplanes, limited numbers of which it got for training purposes in January. The 50 planes scheduled to arrive in May have not yet arrived.

Diplomatic observers here say that the Syrian desire to deepen relations with the Soviet Union is taking into consideration the military aspect of any agreement to be concluded. These observers feel that the Syrian officials have raised the pitch of the discussion of the anticipated treaties as an indication of their good intentions, and in order to encourage the Soviets to supply them with the advanced weapons.

Friendship Treaty or Joint Defense Treaty?

These four indications were the obvious political groundwork behind the meetings of the ruling party's national congress, and they remained so after the party's Central Committee meetings dealing with implementing the congress' resolutions. Does that mean that Syria is tending towards concluding a friendship treaty with the Soviet Union? Or will a joint defense treaty be the anticipated step, even with the major effects it might have on the Middle East situation?

Syrian Foreign Minister 'Abd-al-Halim Khaddam acknowledges that the Arab situation today is not helping Syria take any daring steps on the level of relations with the Soviet Union. Minister Khaddam has told many of his visitors that Syria is determined to take a big step towards the Soviet Union but has not yet decided how big a step, in the expectation that the Arab stand will become clear on the eve of the November Arab summit conference in Jordan.

Khaddam says that a friendship treaty between Syria and the Soviet Union is a "natural step" and is not Syria's maximum aspiration. Responding to a question about how far Syria wants to go, Khaddam said, "We want everything that would ensure Syria's safety and security." By this he means the security and safety of the regime.

Informed Syrian sources say that Syrian officials have recently devoted themselves to analyzing statements about friendship treaties previously signed by the Soviet Union with nations outside the sphere of the socialist camp, one such treaty being the Soviet-South Yemeni friendship treaty.

Sources here add that Damascus officials are analyzing the clauses pertaining to "consultation and cooperation in case of an attack on either country." The intention here is also, naturally, ensuring Soviet support in confronting domestic developments against the regime.

Syrian sources say that Damascus is trying to find out whether the clauses of these friendship treaties would meet the purpose, or whether they need to be strengthened by an addendum dealing with joint defense, or

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whether a joint defense treaty should be signed, even though this would mean that Syria would become one of Moscow's satellites.

The Negative Aspects of an Agreement With Moscow

Damascus is afraid of the third possibility, because of the nationalist circumstances in the Arab world, and because the signing of a joint defense treaty with the Soviet Union might lead to alienating other Arab capitals, as happened when South Yemen signed its political and military agreements with the Soviet Union 2 years ago.

Damascus is also afraid that the oil states would suspend their aid to Syria, aid which was allocated in past summit conferences and which constitutes a huge portion of Syria's budget.

Diplomatic sources in Damascus say that Moscow is aware of this situation, and therefore will not exert any pressure for a joint defense treaty as long as Syria does not ask for it plainly. These diplomatic sources feel that this point is still being studied in Damascus, and that a decision on it depends on President Al-Asad and how he views regional developments.

Iran's role plays a prominent part in the discussion of the defense treaty, especially after the slackening of relations between Iran and the Soviet Union. Diplomatic sources in Damascus feel that the Tehran government will not approve of a defense alliance between Syria and the Soviet Union, in view of the effects that would have on the Middle East balance of power.

These sources say that Tehran's stand calling for non-commitment with either Moscow or Washington was conveyed to Damascus officials during Iranian Foreign Minister Sadegh Ghotbzadeh's visit to Damascus. These sources say that Iran has stressed its desire that the area's regimes not turn towards alliances with the Eastern or the Western camps, because the circumstances which resulted from the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan have made it difficult for the Iranian Government to accept the presence of military alliances on its western front.

In any case, the next few weeks will be decisive in the controversy now going on within the political-military leadership in Damascus about the dimensions and level of the anticipated agreement with Moscow.

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SYRIA

BRIEFS

PARIS-BASED ASSASSINATION TEAM--Informed security sources in Paris have estimated the number of assassination and sabotage specialists dispatched to the French capital by Syria at 10 to 15 persons, working in 3-man teams. AL-WATAN AL-'ARABI has learned that Lt Col Ahmad 'Abbud, a Syrian intelligence officer, is responsible for the assassination teams in the French capital. Former Syrian Prime Minister Salah al-Bitar was assassinated the Monday before last by a bullet fired at him by a professional killer. The finger of suspicion has been pointed at the Syrian security agencies, as a result of the threat made by President al-Asad's brother, Col Rif'at al-Asad, to pursue and eliminate Syrian opposition elements wherever they are, at home or abroad. AL-WATAN AL-'ARABI has also learned that among members of the Syrian assassination teams are two young men named 'Abd-al-Jabbar Diyab and Nabil al-Buz. Tension has increased between Syrian student groups for and against the regime at French universities and institutes. Some opposition students say that they have been threatened with liquidation. In another context, news from the Syrian capital indicates that intensified security measures have been taken there. Syrian information media continue to broadcast news about defections from the Moslem Brotherhood. It is reported that Syrian authorities have imposed strict restrictions on leaving the country. [Text] Paris AL-WATAN AL-'Arabi in Arabic 1-7 Aug 80 p 18] 8559

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TUNISIA

GOVERNMENT SHOWING SIGNS OF GROWING MORE LIBERAL

Paris MARCHES TROPICAUX ET MEDITERRANEENS in French 22 Aug 80 pp 2064, 2068

[Article: "Tunisian Regime Bent on Making Overtures"]

[Text] The political "overture," as defined, even announced, by Mohamed Mzali's speech in Mahdia on 21 June (see MTM of 11 July, p 1721), appeared in the prime minister's interview in LE MONDE of 10 July as the decisive element of a "new deal" in Tunisia, the essential modalities of which are popular participation, criticism of the government, and free expression, according to another interview given this time to ACTION (Tunis) on 10 August. Concrete measures have already been taken in that direction, thus permitting to foresee the scope of that plan, as well as the limitations prescribed, at least for the time being, by it.

The 77th birthday of the president, celebrated on 3 August by himself, in full intellectual and physical form, falls this time during Ramadan, thus offering a particularly appropriate occasion for clemency measures. The conditional release of 82 prisoners was announced, to be followed by a presidential amnesty for 138 others. "In Tunisian jails," the president said, "there are no more political detainees, including trade unionists the last two of whom have been set free, as well as students the last five of whom have been released after I received them at Skanes Palace." As for those convicted for the Gafsa affair and who are not political prisoners, a reduction in jail terms is expected. Moreover, the suppression on 8 August of the function of attorney general of the republic is all the more significant as the holder of that post for more than 20 years, Mohamed Farhat, brother of the former minister, had conducted all major political trials with extreme severity.

Trade Unionists and Students

The release of Abderrazzak Ghorbal and Mohammed Salah Brouer, members of the former Central Committee of the Tunisian General Federation of Labor (UGTT), sentenced respectively to 10 and 6 years forced labor, incited the former

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UGTT secretary general, Habib Achour, the last Tunisian "under house arrest" to send the president a warm cable, greeting these measures "apt to make the political and social climate more healthy." Noting to that purpose that there is from now on a "climate favorable to all kinds of discussions, compromises, and understandings," Mzali announced on 10 July that the government proposes that "democratic elections be immediately held in a serene atmosphere at trade union grassroots level." The present UGTT leaders, aware that their sharply contested representativeness does not permit them to convoke a regular congress without outside aid, do not oppose that solution which would undoubtedly enable them to keep a few seats alongside a majority of former central committee members and representatives of neutral trade unions, at last aroused from passivity. It would be possible, therefore, to close the wounds caused by the distressing day of 26 January 1978, and to open the dialog capable, as Prime Minister Mzali reiterated on 9 August, of averting class struggle and its lacerations.

Decided by an interministerial committee on 31 July, the suppression of the very unpopular "university vigils" will guarantee that future congresses be held properly, a party communique declares. The five released students were sentenced in 1975 to 7 and 9 years in jail for adhesion to "Travailleur tunisien," a Marxist-Leninist group.

Thus, it seems henceforth possible for the prime minister at the beginning of the school term to call on freely elected student delegates, voluntary professors agreed upon by them, and faculty deans, to organize together a truly representative general congress. Nevertheless, Mzali did not exclude the eventuality of a failure of which, he said, "the government will wash its hands since it will have done its best." In fact, the passivity of "neutral" students, and the reciprocal surliness of "Islamic fundamentalists" and "left wingers" risk to sterilize the debate, unless there is an evolution toward participation.

The prime minister said, as he previously did in LE MONDE, that the essential question is not agreement or conflict between students and the government since politization of the youth is a normal thing, and their anguish and even their revolt are understandable, and that one cannot prevent the university, a "crossroad of ideas," from debating ideas. No leader has ever come up with more "overtures." However, the dialog has yet to be accepted at all. The prime minister, remindful of the difficult conditions of his boyhood, thinks not only of students, but also a disinherited youths, of "street children," in favor of whom the government will act with the "utmost urgency." Besides, family planning must proceed toward a policy of family education; but the family's primordial responsibilities do not exclude that of the state.

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Liberal Concessions and Inflection in Party Behavior

On the purely political plane, there are no premonitory signs of spectacular and encompassing measures--authorization for multipartism, and amnesty for political convicts residing abroad--which opponents on the whole would look upon as sufficient proof of deep mutation of the regime. "The essential thing," Mzali told LE MONDE, "is that all currents can freely express their thoughts. The rest is a question of time, evolution, and maturation."

Therefore, the "liberal" steps taken by the government remain for the time being, individual and junctural. On 18 July, Ahmed Mestiri and his friends received the authorization to publish AVENIR and AL MOSTAQBAL, two weeklies expected to come out in tandem with ER RAI, also a weekly, and DEMOCRATIE, a monthly newspaper, to be edited by another socialist democrat fraction. On 3 August, Mohammed Masmoudi, a former minister faulted for his attempt at fusion with Libya in January 1974, is no longer under house arrest; however, he is still unable to go abroad; this spring, he made a hunger strike.

For the time being, no authorization to publish is accorded Ahmed ben Salah's Movement of Popular Unity, the Tunisian Communist party, and the Islamic fundamentalists whose two publications were suspended last winter.

Nevertheless, Mzali told ACTION (9 August) that various political trends would be able to "convey their thoughts freely through newspapers, for instance," yet, without giving any deadline. He also anticipated the involvement of representatives of "currents of thoughts" in seeking solutions for national problems. As a matter of fact, the problem of student representation has just been carefully examined; similar measure will apply to the Sixth Plan. Notwithstanding, the prime minister has held to the traditional thesis that the Destourian Socialist Party (PSD) has an "incontestable historical legitimacy" that has, in consequence, made it naturally unique. But the behavior of the party may change, so as to vindicate its claim that "it stays in the forefront due to its ability to renew itself, to restructure its forces, and to readjust its programs and means of action." (Editorial of ACTION, 2 August, under the title, "The Overture We Want").

On 23 July, as a first measure promoting "rotation of responsibilities," the Political Bureau limited the mandate of secretaries-general of coordination committees to a single electoral session. On 8 August, the president took a resounding sanction, dismissing Ameer ben Aicha, the former deputy director, from the party and stripping him of his parliamentary seat, for meddling with the judiciary.

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On 29 July, presiding over a meeting of Tunis Destourian cadres, Mongi Kooli, party director, clearly stated that the PSD is "the party of principles and not of individuals," and that the militantism within its ranks must not be used as a "diving board for personal ambitions." The true Destourian must be altruist, must have a sense of abnegation and a relish for responsibility.

As for the rejuvenating overture, "it means in our eyes an opening up to all, without discriminating against any social categories"; that is why greater attention must be accorded the youth while watching over the "continuity of generations." Events in the coming months will show the extent to which a more demanding ethic and a large accommodation of new forces will transform the party. But will that effort be enough to discourage those Tunisian citizens who still persist in looking forward to another concurrent framework to conduct their political action?

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